

What an Interruption in Study Can Reveal about Learner Motivation and Resilience

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Abstract

As a professional working on strategies to help improve the retention of undergraduate students, the continued drop-out of some first degree entrants recorded by the Higher Education Statistics Agency can sometimes be regarded as the inevitable consequence of a burgeoning sector. While much research has been undertaken on why these students decided to withdraw from their programme of study, what seems less well understood are those undergraduates who interrupt their studies but then decide to return. This article considers the learner motivation and resilience of three mature undergraduate students who interrupted but then returned to complete their studies. What comes through clearly in their narratives is a strong, reflexive subjectivity with their learner dispositions heavily shaped both by a strong sense of determined individualisation and the crucial influence of others in supporting their motivation and resilience in keeping going. In conclusion, it is suggested that if interruption is not always viewed institutionally as withdrawal, this might enable universities to communicate with and encourage students to return to study.

Keywords: Higher education/learner motivation/learner resilience/biographical narrative

Introduction

The retention and completion of students in higher education institutions have increasingly become the main ways used by the government and funding agencies to measure both student and institutional success (What Works? Student Retention & Success programme, Higher Education Academy, 2012).

The Higher Education Statistics Agency data confirms that the vast majority of undergraduate students who commence a programme of study do end up completing. However what is also clear in the HESA data on non-continuation is that every year a percentage of first degree entrants do not continue (from 7.6% in 1997/98 down to 5.7% in 2012/13). While many of these students do not return, the focus of this paper is on examining the reasons why some students instead of withdrawing decide to interrupt their studies and then return. So the primary aim of this research was to add narratives to the findings of learner motivation and resilience identified in the existing

biographical research and to begin to examine some of the reasons why learners might decide to return and not withdraw from their studies.

Why is this institutionally important?

The Office for Fair Access requires higher education institutions to submit access agreements on an annual basis that forecast the expenditure universities will require for *Student success* and *Progression* work (OFFA, 2014). As part of the submission process institutions are required to state how funding will be used to support student success. Therefore institutions are held accountable for the work they will do around student interruption and withdrawal. So there is now an institutional need to look at the advice and guidance that is given to students around interrupting their studies, as well as an evaluation of the work done with interrupters to encourage them to return to study. It is also clear that the development of strategies to identify and support those at risk of interrupting can be assisted by working qualitatively with those students who have returned to study.

What do we already know about learner resilience and motivation?

Over the past 20 years there has been a trend in educational research towards examining the experiences of learners (young and mature) in higher education (West, 1996; Lucey *et al*, 2003; West & Carlson, 2006; Robb *et al*, 2007; Merrill & West, 2009; Reay *et al*, 2009; Bainbridge and West, 2012; Houlton, 2011). This research has focused on the social, environmental and psychological contexts of learners' lives and has attempted to capture the stories learners tell of their experiences and interactions in higher education. This examination of learners' lives has also been enabled by a move away from the pre-eminence of qualitative surveys (Merrill & West, 2009) to the increased use of biographical research. The research undertaken by West and others has enabled the development of a more complex understanding of these learners and for the purposes of this article, it is these research findings, rather than the large-scale quantitative studies of attrition and completion, that will be considered.

The biographical research that has been undertaken with younger non-traditional learners highlights the significance of the mother as a role model for these learners. In research undertaken by Robb *et al* (2007), which details biographical life narrative interviews with immigrant students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, it is the mother who provides strong support and a key influence often through a positive narrative of education to help secure a better future. While the extent of help given by the mothers varies, they all provide encouragement and practical help in creating places where schoolwork can be done and instilling structure and discipline. In the Lucey *et al* research, working-class mothers are the significant others in their daughters' lives, wanting them to have better lives than they had, 'all we want is for our children to do better than we did' (2003: 294). So for some students the motivational role of the mother is significant in encouraging resilience in educational aspiration, often providing strategic and practical support.

The biographical research suggests that what is crucial for learners is that the significant other is a figure of influence that supports the learner and their aspirations often with practical knowledge. While the mother might take this role it can also be a father, grandparent, friend, teacher or sibling. Cartlidge's research (2012) on Liz, a mature learner, details how her significant other was her father, who Liz describes as 'the wisest man I've ever known' (p.98). Liz constantly stresses her father's importance in encouraging her imagination and love of reading and learning. Her father remained her main motivator in learning even after his death. Research by Robb *et al* (2007) discussed the role of teachers as significant others, with many of the students feeling 'believed in' by a teacher and highlights how this provided a strong incentive to achieve. In research undertaken by Reay *et al* (2009), the mature student Chloe describes the influence of her access course teacher in encouraging her to apply to university. The role of friends is also significant in shaping attitudes and boosting learner confidence. In Houlton's account (2011) of Sarah, an apprehensive mature learner returning to study, it is her friends who encourage her to 'go for it'.

The role played by the trauma of on-going difficulty as well as of catastrophic events in learner motivation and resilience is another key theme found in the biographical research that has been undertaken by West *et al.* The research details the trauma of respondents dealing with on-going poverty and the insecurity of disrupted lives, having to overcome crises, complex family backgrounds, disrupted early schooling and long-term absences caused by illness. In West and Carlson's research (2006) there is the extended trauma of living in a marginalised community, where the extent of poverty is considerable and unemployment often long-term. The parents who got involved in the *Sure Start* childcare and community project that this research details, needed to demonstrate resilience in overcoming their suspicions in returning to learning, despite distressing personal histories. What the project provided was a 'lifeline' that helped those involved to cope with their ongoing challenges of depression and isolation. We also find motivation and resilience developing as a result of trauma in Hoult's account (2011) of Joe, who demonstrates his resilience by returning to study, overcoming low expectations about his academic ability as well as having to overcome major disability and a medical condition.

The biographical research also highlights an outcome of overcoming trauma and adversity can involve or result in marginalisation from family, friends and community as well as the need to live in two different worlds at the same time and a tolerance of the difficulties that this can bring for the learner. This is examined in the research by Reay *et al* (2009) in which Jim asserts his agency with 'I'd always been taught that the only person who can help you is yourself' (p.1107). In this article the students demonstrate their ability to move successfully between working-class home life and middle-class university life, while acknowledging this sense of cultural dissonance had started during childhood. For these students their identity construction is bound up with academic success to ensure they escape the fear of poverty and unemployment.

The issue of deliberate marginalisation is also examined in research by Lucey *et al* (2003) where learning to operate between two cultures and classes can mean a disassociation, which is not only inevitable but also essential as a way to cope with the 'terrifying differences in practices, subject positions, modes of discourse, performance and regulation that the two worlds provide' (p.296). The research suggests that resilience is needed to enable the adult learner to operate effectively in two different worlds. However, it is also important to acknowledge the risks attendant with this disassociation in 'going it alone', that can result in the loss of the self as well as family and friends. This is well illustrated in Hoult's account (2011) of Sarah, an apprehensive returner to education. While some friends are supportive, others respond with apathy. However, Sarah appears to find motivation from this potential marginalisation, realising perhaps that this might be a necessary part of being a resilient adult learner. Significantly for Hoult, Sarah occupies a marginalised position 'that is half inside and half outside a community' (p.132) and this ability to operate between two different worlds does seem to be a recurrent theme for some non-traditional adult learners.

West & Merrill (2009) characterise higher education as a transitional space where inner and outer worlds are connected and in which there is a negotiation and renegotiation of self in relationship to others. The setting can prompt questions of who a person is, has been and might want to be, which in turn can provoke intense anxiety to cope with change and whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant others, students or tutors. For Jacki Cartlidge the challenges contingent in this new experience, combined with new knowledge, can 'raise deeply embodied, felt questions about who we are, might be, and whether we are good enough, which might reach back to earliest experiences and touch the most primitive levels of personality' (2012: 97).

While biographical research work undertaken in the last 20 years has provided rich narratives of learners' experiences and interactions in higher education, West (2009) acknowledges that in post-structuralist critiques these narratives can risk being viewed as re-storied, mediated accounts. Georgakopoulou observes that in narrative research there can be an overemphasis in interviews on 'long stories' or grand narratives as being the only stories worthy of analysis at the expense of the small stories people tell of their everyday interactions (2006: 1). The result of this emphasis can be

that biographical research on learner motivation and resilience may privilege these bigger stories that are produced from the pages and pages of interview transcripts over the smaller internalised stories. In these mediated biographical research accounts what seems missing, in my view, are respondents' own accounts of their own learning and the stories they tell themselves to keep on going.

These unique internal stories which learners tell themselves to keep going, despite interruption, can add to and supplement the existing knowledge of learner motivation and resilience and for this article I chose a combined writing/interview approach to try and elicit these internal narratives. The value of this combined methodological approach is that it enables respondents to produce their own written responses, reconstructing and making sense of their learning, before being interviewed on these responses. The combined methodological approach was an attempt to effectively capture the learners' experience and their internal stories of resilience.

Research methodology

This research was undertaken at a London university with mature undergraduate students who had previously interrupted, but then returned. In order to contain the study it was decided to only contact those students who were doing social science degrees and who had interrupted their studies in 2011 – 12. The 27 students who were identified as interrupting during 2011 – 12 and then returning, were emailed asking whether they would be interested in being involved. The 6 students who replied and agreed to be involved were therefore self-selecting and they were emailed with a more detailed description of what the combined writing and interview methodological approach involved. This resulted in three students (Paul, Julia and Fiona) replying and agreeing to be involved.

Once the students had agreed to take part, they were emailed the writing task about their motivations in doing a degree and whether they could identify anything in their past that might have enabled them to overcome the challenges they experienced in studying and whether they could identify significant other(s) who might have motivated their learning. The students were asked to respond 'as openly as you feel comfortable with' to the questions. A maximum word limit of 750 words was suggested to provide some structure and to avoid them feeling overwhelmed by the task. These written responses were to form the basis of a follow-up interview with each student and once completed they were read and re-read to identify attitudes towards education and the themes of motivation and resilience that could be followed up in the interview. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed and these transcripts were emailed to the students so they could check the ordering, their phrasing and to make any changes to what was recorded.

Given the small, focused nature of this study, thematic analysis was chosen as the method to analyse the data, as it is well suited to identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Firstly, all the narrative data was read and re-read several times in order to become familiar with it. Secondly, interesting individual features that stand out in the reading were marked. Examples of these features include where a student repeats phrases or explains in great detail an incident, as well as the use of figures of speech such as metaphors that are used to describe their motivation and resilience. Emerging common themes, which are features that students appear to share, were also marked across the dataset and both individual features and common themes were then coded. Thirdly, the data was reviewed in order to ensure that a name and a clear definition for each feature and theme had been identified and that the features and themes work in relation to the extracts.

Findings and discussion

In both their writing and interviews all three students placed a high value on the positive effects of higher education. It is a place that on the whole contains good experiences, good 'objects', including people, activities and ideas.

'I really enjoyed it that was the thing, so I missed it' (Fiona)

'The experience has been amazing. I met and made some good friends' (Julia)

However, set against these 'celebratory discourses' (Lucey, 2010: 450) are also intense moments of self-doubt, made manifest in a troubling exam mark, a tough third year and the destabilising effects of new learning. These difficulties taken together with their interruption of study suggest, that for these students higher education is a complex set of experiences and processes of both conformity and resistance that continues throughout their study. It is clear that these are not linear narratives of progression, where eventual outcomes such as what might come after their degree are known. Instead, when the students experience critical moments during the degree, their reflexivity is able to emerge and with resilience and a developed educational capital they are able to keep on going. There is also a strong sense of subjectivity in the narratives and the idea of being 'different'. *'I feel like a different person... I look back and I don't recognise myself'* (Fiona).

What can be inferred in the students' narratives is that this perception of individualisation and difference could link to a sense of marginalisation that they experienced in their pasts. In Fiona's narrative, she highlights how she had the least supportive family during her childhood and was homeless at the age of 16. In school, Julia felt other kids thought she was 'weird' for wanting to be an archaeologist, and for Paul there's the assumption of school friends having done 'proper' degrees when he felt he had not. For these students, the occupation of a past marginalised position seems to elide in dealing with the anxiety and interruption in their current learning. As well as individualisation, the role of strong relationships is a consistent feature in the narratives. The students acknowledge the part played by others in encouraging and guiding their study. While past significant others are a key to resilience, close everyday relationships, in this case with other students, are also a way of helping to deal with the uncertainties of study. These on-going relationships are significant since for Luther and Brown resilience rests fundamentally on these relationships, 'support, love and security fosters resilience in part, by reinforcing people's innate strengths (such as self-efficacy, positive emotions and emotion regulation)' (2007: 780).

Many of the features found in the students' narratives do confirm much of what is found about learner motivation and resilience in biographical research. The overcoming of adversity, the significance of others, childhood trauma, illness and the challenge of study all find places in their narratives. What comes through clearly from the narratives is Hoult's definition of an adult resilient learner being a person 'who has faced considerable challenges – more than those of the average student - yet is ultimately able to succeed and thrive academically' (2011: 7).

However, for these students, their motivation and resilience is much more than the capacity to 'bounce back' and to survive and thrive in adversity. It was clear from their internal narratives that their determination to succeed academically is strongly part of their identity construction, despite the uncertainties inherent in doing a degree programme. Having made the commitment to do a degree, they were all convinced that they would return after they interrupted and that they could not give up, as they all placed a high value on learning and educational capital.

There is also a sense of resilience in the relational setting in the narratives. The idea of learning and developing together with other students is not found in biographical research. However, these narratives detail the importance of friends made during their degree and how they were lost during interruption, but then how new connections are formed on returning to study. The value of these relationships in terms of peer support and the ability to share with other students the challenges found in learning again, demonstrates how learner motivation and resilience is not just a marginalised individualisation.

The combined writing/interview methodological approach enabled the collection of narratives that were both consistent and contradictory in this reiterative methodology. Whereas Fiona had constructed a consistent discourse of determination in her writing, this was partially contradicted in

her interview where she hints also at her lack of confidence and insecurity. With Julia, while there is a 'self-imposed' central premise of determination in her writing, there are places in her interview where this dominant discourse runs out of explanatory power and she cannot always fully explain her thoughts. The attitude towards education that Paul takes up in his writing varies in his more reflective interview. While appearing reconciled to a changed perception of what education means to him, his detailed interview response to the central place of learning for him infers that qualifications should also 'eventually lead to a more interesting job'.

In attempting to collect rich narratives on learner motivation, resilience and interruption, the staged approach adopted in this combined methodology proved crucial in this study. The concepts of resilience and learner interruption had been introduced to potential respondents in the initial email communication about this research study. Significantly, those students who agreed to take part all stated openly in their responding email that they felt resilience was an interesting area of research and that they were happy to discuss their thoughts on their learning and their reasons for interruption. In the second stage the students were asked to begin to actively reflect on their positioning towards their educational motivations and influences. So by the final interview stage, the students were comfortable enough to discuss their writing in more detail as well as their reasons for interrupting and what internal narratives kept their learning going.

Conclusion

This research aimed at assessing whether a combined writing and interview approach could produce less mediated narratives, which might in turn provide an insight into the students' internal stories of learner motivation and resilience. While many of the features identified in the combined narratives of this research do confirm much of what is found about learner motivation and resilience in the biographical research, the staged approach taken in this combined methodology has enabled the collection of some of the 'small stories' (Georgakopoulou, 2006) about why learners interrupt, as well as the stories that learners tell themselves in order to keep going. What comes through clearly in the detailed narratives is a strong, reflexive respondent subjectivity, with consistent and at times contradictory identity constructions around learning. While the students' learner dispositions are heavily shaped by a strong sense of determined individualisation, their narratives also make clear that their resilience depends on the motivation and influence of others as well as on the relational aspects with others that they find in their learning.

There are various recommendations to have emerged from these resilience narratives that universities should consider in relation to their retention strategies:

- It is clear it was the students' own drive to return that meant that they came back after their interruption. It is also apparent that no contact was made with these students during their year away and little was done institutionally to ensure that they returned. Therefore it is crucial that higher education institutions do not assume that interruption is a proxy for withdrawal and consequently limit their communication, but that they remain in contact with those who interrupt their study in the expectation that these students will return.
- The relational resilience that the students experienced with their peers was crucial in fostering both their academic and social integration. This was particularly important when they had returned after their interruption. However, these students' academic and social re-integration might have been a less traumatic process if there had been an institutional mentoring programme that matched students who shared a similar experience of study interruption with these returning students to help foster a sense of connection and a feeling of belonging again. While the students in my study were able to make a successful transition back to study, for others, having a supported reintegration might be the difference between withdrawal and return.
- While these students interrupted but returned to study, others do not. So, is it possible and would it be helpful at an institutional level to measure the psychological resilience of students as well as trying to encourage its development? In their research Allan *et al*

highlight that universities have yet to evaluate the psychological resilience of students to reveal whether there are links between students' mental wellbeing and their attainment. They point out the value this might have for universities in trying to identify 'patterns of adaptive capacity which help to target assistance for meeting transitional, academic and pastoral needs' (2014: 13)

Finally, while this research affirms that 'resilience is a complex and dynamic construct' (Walker *et al*, 2006: 261), some of the features that have emerged would also benefit from further research. It is clear that the internal narratives that these learners tell themselves to keep going are a key element of their resilience and further biographical research examining the psychological and relational resilience of learners would help to increase our understanding and counter the paucity of research in this area. In addition, research is needed to better understand why some individuals are able to successfully adapt and endure in higher education and whether it might be possible that this endurance and adaptive resilience can be promoted in all learners. Hoult expands this thought by suggesting that a clearer understanding of learner resilience might also mean 'that it is possible to create conditions where it might flourish' (2013: 46).

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